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(11) **EP 1 072 516 A1**

(12) **EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION**

(43) Date of publication:
31.01.2001 Bulletin 2001/05

(51) Int. Cl.⁷: **B65B 19/22**, B65G 61/00,
B65G 47/90, B65B 43/14

(21) Application number: **00113507.8**

(22) Date of filing: **26.06.2000**

(84) Designated Contracting States:
**AT BE CH CY DE DK ES FI FR GB GR IE IT LI LU
MC NL PT SE**
Designated Extension States:
AL LT LV MK RO SI

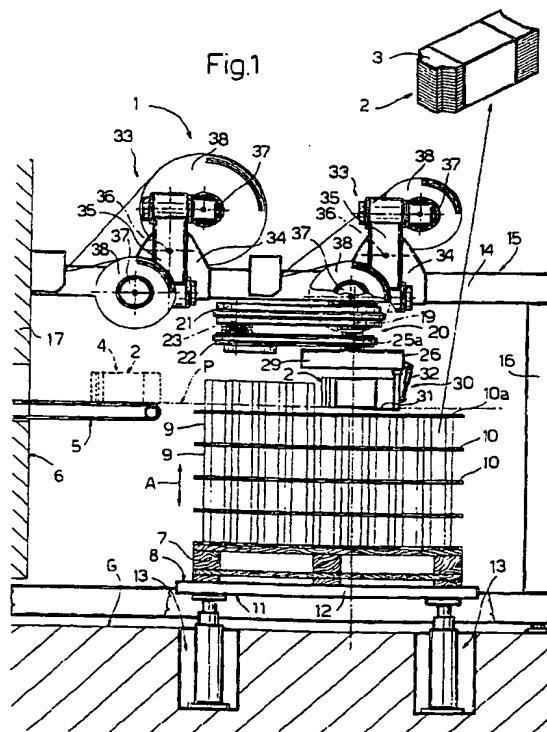
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(30) Priority: **30.06.1999 IT BO990354**

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(54) **Unit for transferring packing material, e.g. stacks of blanks, to a cigarette packaging machine**

(57) On a cigarette packing machine (6), a stack (2) of blanks (3) is transferred from a supporting pallet (7) to an input (4) of the packing machine (6) by a transfer unit (1) having an articulated activating arm (20) fitted to a fixed platform (14) and by which a pickup device (26) for picking up a stack (2) of blanks (3) is moved along a horizontal pickup plane (P) coplanar with the input (4) and located inside a given space (C) housing both the pallet (7) and the input (4); the pallet (7) being moved to and from the pickup plane (P) in a direction perpendicular to the pickup plane (P).



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Description

[0001] The present invention relates to a unit for transferring packing material, defined for example by stacks of blanks, to an input of a cigarette packing machine.

[0002] Though reference is made in the following description, purely by way of example, to supplying stacks of blanks, the transfer unit according to the invention may also be used for supplying packing materials other than stacks of blanks and defined, for example, by reels of strip material.

[0003] In the conditioning of cigarettes, stacks of blanks, each comprising a number of blanks bound in a wrapper, are supplied individually to the input of a packing machine. Normally, the stacks of blanks are arranged on a supporting pallet, which is positioned on a substantially horizontal supporting surface close to the input and supports a number of superimposed layers of stacks.

[0004] The packing machine normally has an automatic transfer unit comprising a pickup device for picking up and feeding each stack from the pallet to the input.

[0005] In one known automatic transfer unit of the above type, the pickup device is carried by an articulated supporting arm for moving the pickup device in a horizontal plane parallel to the supporting surface; and the articulated supporting arm itself is movable, by a lifting device, along a vertical column to set the pickup device to the height of the stack to be picked up.

[0006] Known transfer units of the above type have several drawbacks, mainly due to the presence of the vertical column and the lifting device fitted to it. That is, the articulated supporting arm and the pickup device must be fitted so as to project from the column, and, since the pallet can only be mounted alongside the column - i.e. in a lateral position with respect to the point at which the articulated supporting arm is connected to the lifting device - the articulated supporting arm, when extended, must be fairly long. Consequently, to ensure fast, accurate movement in space, the articulated supporting arm and the pickup device call for fairly rigid, high-cost connections both between each other and between the articulated supporting arm and the column.

[0007] It is an object of the present invention to provide a unit for transferring stacks of blanks to an input of a cigarette packing machine, and designed to eliminate the aforementioned drawbacks.

[0008] According to the present invention, there is provided a transfer unit for transferring packing materials, defined for example by stacks of blanks, to an input of a cigarette packing machine, the unit comprising gripping means for gripping a packing material item; and polar activating means for moving said gripping means, about a polar axis, along a pickup plane perpendicular to said polar axis and substantially coplanar with said input, and inside a given space enclosing said input and

of such dimensions as to accommodate a pallet supporting said stacks and positioned parallel to said pickup plane; said gripping means being movable, with respect to said activating means, about a first axis parallel to said polar axis; and first actuating means being provided to vary a distance between said first axis and said polar axis; the transfer unit being characterized by comprising a fixed platform substantially perpendicular to said polar axis and supporting said activating means; and shift means for supporting said pallet in a position through which said polar axis extends, and for moving the pallet to and from said gripping means and along said polar axis.

[0009] A non-limiting embodiment of the present invention will be described by way of example with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Figure 1 shows a partly sectioned side view of a preferred embodiment of the transfer unit according to the present invention;

Figure 2 shows a plan view, with parts in section and parts removed for clarity, of the Figure 1 unit in two different operating positions.

[0010] With reference to Figures 1 and 2, number 1 indicates as a whole a transfer unit for transferring stacks 2 of blanks 3 to an input 4 of a conveyor 5 for feeding stacks 2 onto a cigarette packing machine 6.

[0011] Stacks 2, each of which comprises a number of superimposed blanks 3 bound by a wrapper, are moved up to a point close to machine 6 on a pallet 7, which is positioned, close to input 4, on a substantially horizontal supporting surface 8 parallel to the ground G, and supports a number of layers 9 of stacks 2. Layers 9 are arranged one on top of the other, and are each supported on the adjacent underlying layer via the interposition of a substantially rigid board 10. In the following description, the top layer 9 of stacks 2 is indicated 9a, and the relative supporting board 10 indicated 10a.

[0012] Unit 1 comprises a lifting device 11, in turn comprising a horizontal platform 12, the top surface of which defines surface 8 supporting pallet 7, and a number of lifting jacks 13 supporting platform 12 and which are activated to move platform 12, in a vertical direction A, between a lowered position wherein supporting surface 8 is coplanar with ground G, and a raised position, described in detail later on, wherein platform 12 is located close to a fixed, substantially horizontal platform 14 defining the cross member of a gantry 15 of such a size as to enclose a space S large enough to receive both pallet 7 and input 4.

[0013] Gantry 15 comprises two uprights, which are integral with two opposite sides of platform 14, are defined respectively by a substantially vertical pillar 16 and by a frame 17 of packing machine 6, and support platform 14 in a position directly facing platform 12 and at a height, off ground G, greater than the height of platform 12 in the raised position.

[0014] Platform 14 supports a drive assembly 18 having three independent outputs (shown only partly) coaxial with an axis 19 parallel to direction A and extending through platforms 12 and 14. A first of said outputs, defined by a shaft 18a coaxial with axis 19, is connected integrally to an articulated arm 20 located between platforms 12 and 14 and rotated, by drive assembly 18 and with respect to platforms 12 and 14, about axis 19, which defines a polar axis of articulated arm 20.

[0015] Articulated arm 20 comprises a horizontal first arm 21 integral at one end with shaft 18a; and a second arm 22, one end of which is hinged to a free end of arm 21 to enable arm 22 to be rotated, with respect to arm 21 and about an axis 23 parallel to polar axis 19, by a transmission 24 extending along arm 21 and activated by a second (not shown) of the three outputs of drive assembly 18. A free end of arm 22 is fitted with a rotary vertical shaft 25 extending outside arm 22, coaxially with a vertical axis 25a, and connected integrally to a pickup device 26, which is rotated, together with shaft 25 and with respect to arm 22, by a transmission 27 activated by a third (not shown) of the three outputs of drive assembly 18, and a first portion (not shown) of which extends along arm 21 to activate two gears 28 integral with each other and mounted idly inside arm 21 and coaxially with axis 23, and a second portion of which extends along arm 22, from one of the two gears 28, to activate a gear fitted to shaft 25.

[0016] Arms 21 and 22 are of the same length. More specifically, the distance between polar axis 19 and axis 23 equals the distance between axis 23 and axis 25a. Consequently, by combining the two independent rotary movements of arm 21 about polar axis 19, and of arm 22 with respect to arm 21, pickup device 26 can be moved - in a pickup plane P perpendicular to polar axis 19 and defined by input 4 and by pickup device 26 itself - to any point in plane P located within a circle C coaxial with polar axis 19 and having a radius of a length equal to twice the distance between axes 19 and 23. As shown in Figure 2, circle C is the intersection of plane P and space S, which is substantially cylindrical and substantially enclosed within gantry 15.

[0017] With reference to Figure 1, pickup device 26, which is a known type, comprises a horizontal plate 29 fitted to arm 22 and integral with one end of shaft 25.

[0018] Pickup device 26 also comprises a known gripping head 30 in turn comprising a fork 31, which is movable, in known manner by an actuator 32 and with respect to plate 29, to successively grip and convey stacks 2 along plane P to input 4.

[0019] In the example shown, fixed platform 14 is advantageously used to support, over articulated arm 20, devices 33 for replacing and feeding respective packing materials to packing machine 6. Each device 33 comprises a bracket 34 connected integrally to platform 14; and a rotary platform 35 fitted to bracket 34 to rotate about a respective axis 36 crosswise to direction A. At

two portions on opposite sides of axis 36, each platform 35 supports two unwinding pins 37 parallel to axis 36 and for respective reels 38. Each supply device 33 is normally associated, in known manner not shown, with a respective store (not shown) of reels 38, which, when needed, are loaded automatically in known manner and alternately onto unwinding pins 37 of rotary platform 35.

[0020] In actual use, pallet 7, with relative stacks 2 of blanks 3, is positioned within space S on platform 12, and articulated arm 20 is moved over pallet 7 to determine, in known manner by means of a known system of sensors, the exact position of stacks 2 in layer 9a. The data relative to the position of stacks 2 is transferred in known manner to a known electronic central control unit (not shown) for controlling all the movements of articulated arm 20 and pickup device 26; and articulated arm 20 is then arrested in a start position wherein fork 31 is positioned outwards of the projection of layer 9a in pickup plane P.

[0021] At this point, platform 12 is raised by jacks 13 in direction A to position board 10a just beneath pickup plane P; articulated arm 20 is then moved from said start position to position fork 31 facing a given lateral surface of a first stack 2 to be removed from layer 9a; and articulated arm 20 and gripping head 30 are then activated to cause fork 31, in known manner, to slide along board 10a and beneath the stack 2 to be removed, and to rotate with respect to plate 29 so as to raise stack 2 slightly off board 10a and into pickup plane P.

[0022] At this point, articulated arm 20 and pickup device 26 are activated to transfer the picked-up stack 2 to input 4 along a path selected each time by the central control unit (not shown) from those not interfering with the stacks 2 still on board 10a.

[0023] In connection with the above, it should be pointed out that locating articulated arm 20 beneath fixed platform 14 and over movable platform 12, so that polar axis 19 extends through platform 12, provides for minimizing the overall size of transfer unit 1, by space S accommodating not only pallet 7 with relative layers 9 of stacks 2, but also articulated arm 20 and relative pickup device 26.

[0024] Moreover, separating the vertical movement of articulated arm 20 from the horizontal movements of articulated arm 20 provides for minimizing vibration and guiding pickup device 26 extremely accurately.

[0025] Finally, the fact that arms 21 and 22 are the same length provides for moving fork 31 to any point inside circle C, thus avoiding any dead zones - always present on known pickup units comprising a lateral lift column - and so further reducing the size of space S.

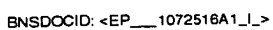
Claims

1. A transfer unit for transferring packing materials, defined for example by stacks of blanks, to an input of a cigarette packing machine, the unit (1) com-

prising gripping means (26) for gripping a packing material item (2); and polar activating means (20) for moving said gripping means (26), about a polar axis (19), along a pickup plane (P) perpendicular to said polar axis (19) and substantially coplanar with said input (4), and inside a given space (S) enclosing said input (4) and of such dimensions as to accommodate a pallet (7) supporting said stacks (2) and positioned parallel to said pickup plane (P); said gripping means (26) being movable, with respect to said polar activating means (20), about a first axis (25a) parallel to said polar axis (19); and first actuating means (18a, 24) being provided to vary a distance between said first axis (25a) and said polar axis (19); the transfer unit being characterized by comprising a fixed platform (14) substantially perpendicular to said polar axis (19) and supporting said polar activating means (20); and shift means (11) for supporting said pallet (7) in a position through which said polar axis (19) extends, and for moving the pallet (7) to and from said gripping means (26) and along said polar axis (19).

acterized in that said fixed platform (14) is a platform supporting means (33) for supplying packing material to said packing machine (6).

7. A unit as claimed in any one of Claims 1 to 6, characterized in that said packing material items are defined by stacks (2) of blanks (3).
2. A unit as claimed in Claim 1, characterized in that said polar activating means (20) comprise an articulated arm (20) in turn comprising a first (21) and a second (22) arm hinged to each other at a second axis (23) parallel to said first axis (25a) and to said polar axis (19); the distance between said first axis (25a) and said second axis (23) being substantially equal to the distance between said second axis (23) and said polar axis (19).
 3. A unit as claimed in Claim 2, characterized in that said space (S) intersects said pickup plane (P) along a circle (C) coaxial with said polar axis (19) and having a radius of a length equal to twice the distance between said first axis (25a) and said second axis (23); all the points in said pickup plane (P) within said circle (C) being reachable by said gripping means (26).
 4. A unit as claimed in Claim 2 or 3, characterized in that said first actuating means (18a, 24) impart to said first (21) and said second (22) arm a first and, respectively, second rotary movement, combinable with each other, about said polar axis (19) and said second axis (23) respectively.
 5. A unit as claimed in any one of Claims 1 to 4, characterized in that said shift means (11) comprise a movable platform (12) facing and substantially parallel to said fixed platform (14) and defining a supporting surface (8) for said pallet (7); and second actuating means (13) for moving said movable platform (12) along said polar axis (19).
 6. A unit as claimed in any one of Claims 1 to 5, char-



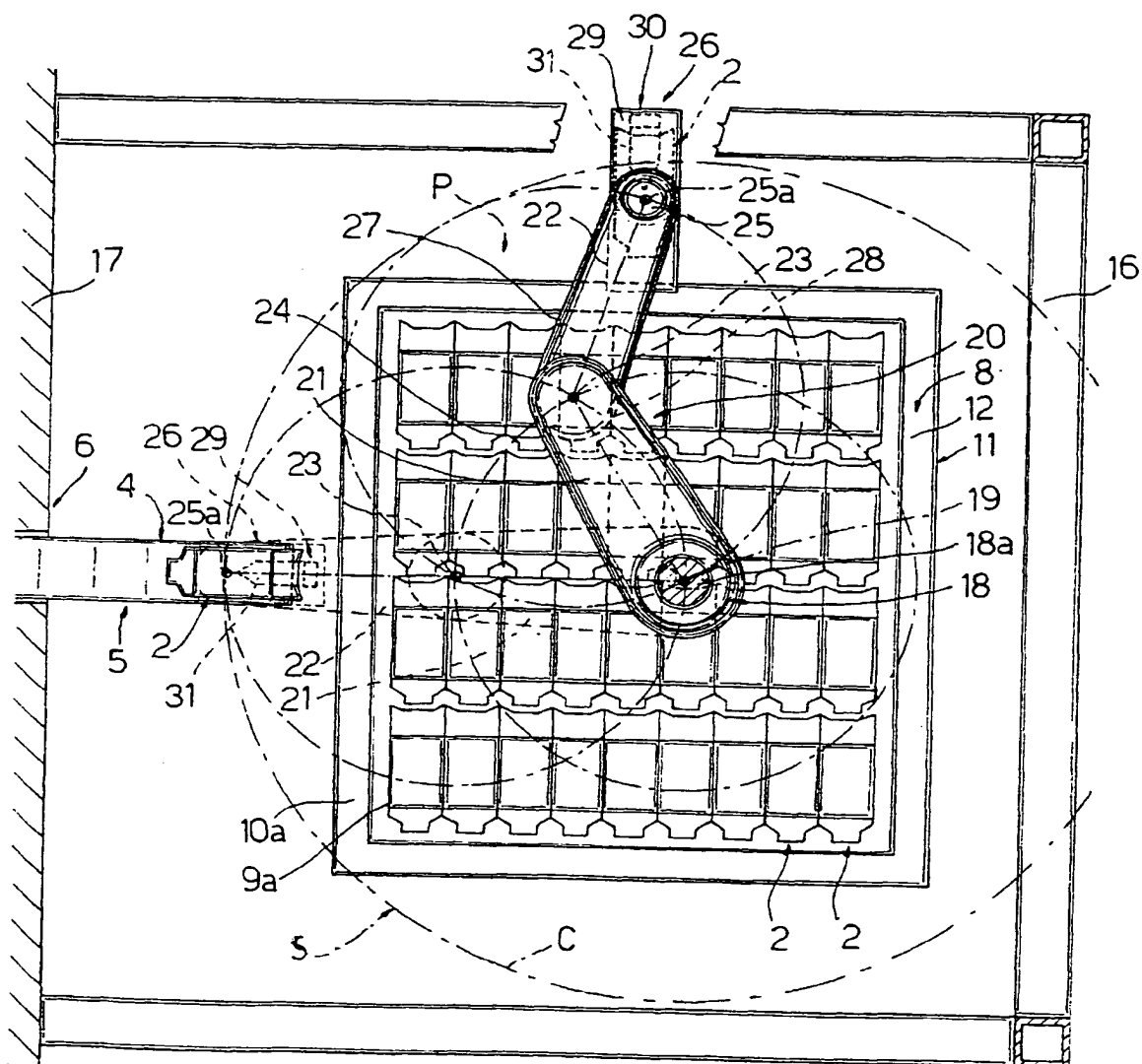


Fig. 2



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EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 00 11 3507

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Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int. CL7)		
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The present search report has been drawn up for all claims					
Place of search THE HAGUE		Date of completion of the search 6 October 2000	Examiner Jagusiak, A		
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